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ABSTRACT

The fourth in a series on attitudinal barriers facing disabled persons, the booklet examines attitudes of disabled toward nondisabled persons. Among five myths contradicted is that nondisabled people are disgusted by disability. Five scenes portraying disabled person's attitudes are presented. The booklet concludes with suggested actions when meeting a nondisabled person (such as being patient with nondisabled people's limitations) and in general conduct (such as politely refusing help when it isn't needed). (CL)

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PREFACE

This booklet is the fourth in a series on attitudinal barriers facing disabled citizens. The first booklet, *The Invisible Battle: Attitudes Toward Disability*, discusses attitudinal barriers encountered by the disabled community in general. Booklet #2, *Beyond the Sound Barrier*, addresses barriers faced by hearing-impaired and deaf citizens. Booklet #3, *Free Wheeling*, focuses attention on barriers confronting wheelchair users.

This booklet, #4, *Counterpoint*, addresses attitudes held by disabled persons toward nondisabled persons. It can be used as a companion piece to *The Invisible Battle*, which outlines attitudes of the nondisabled community toward disabled people.

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Members of the staff of the Regional Rehabilitation Institute on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers who have contributed to this publication include: Sharon Mistler, Debra Cornelius, Susan M. Daniels, Ph.D., and Jeff Strully. Drawings are by Carol C. Netter.

—July 1978

INTRODUCTION

Our previous booklets have examined attitudinal barriers facing disabled citizens. Negative and/or stereotyping attitudes often obstruct independent, dignified life-styles of disabled citizens. These attitudes often arise from fear or simple lack of knowledge about disability. Most importantly, however, these barriers go unrecognized and contribute to miscommunication.

Some barriers which have not been addressed, but are equally important, are those stereotyping and/or negative attitudes held by many disabled people toward nondisabled people. Often stemming from negative experiences or lack of knowledge, these barriers also stand in the way of good communication between disabled and nondisabled people.

This booklet will deal primarily with attitudinal barriers facing nondisabled people: what the major barriers are, how to recognize them, and what you can do about them. We hope it will be helpful in breaking down the barriers to communication encountered by disabled and nondisabled people.

WHAT ARE ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS?

Prejudice	Discrimination
Ignorance	Dislike
Fear	Invisibility
Insensitivity	Insecurity
Bigotry	Discomfort
Stereotyping	Condescension
Misconception	Intolerance

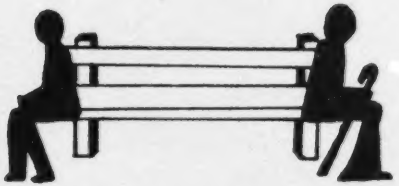
The above words have all been used in association with or in definitions of attitudinal barriers. For this booklet, "attitudinal barriers" has been defined as "a way of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limits the potential of disabled people to be independent individuals."

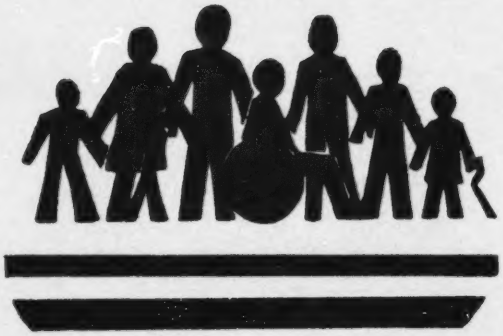
MYTH:
Disabled people can expect nondisabled people to help them.

FACT:
Society has a responsibility to provide equal opportunity to all citizens, including those with disabilities. On a personal level, as a matter of common courtesy most individuals will help each other if there is a need. But one cannot take that help for granted or put another person into a "step and fetch it" role. One can only state a need, ask for assistance, and thank the individual who gives it.

MYTH:
Nondisabled people are disgusted by disability.

FACT:
Because our society places such importance on youth and beauty, many nondisabled people have mixed emotions when they meet someone who is "different." What may be interpreted as disgust may actually be feelings of guilt, curiosity, fear or sympathy. A nondisabled person who fears saying the "wrong" thing to a disabled person may avoid communication. A disabled person may think (s)he is being shunned because of his or her appearance. This discomfort can be helped if disabled and nondisabled people see and interact with each other more often in work and social settings.





MYTH:
Nondisabled people are insensitive about disability and the lives of disabled people.

FACT:
Everyone will have some *disability* at some time. Many nondisabled people will have family members, business associates, friends, and/or spouses who are disabled. It is incorrect to assume that *all* non-disabled people are insensitive to disability issues.

MYTH:
Able-bodied and disabled people have widely different goals.

FACT:
Disability cuts through all segments of society. Disabled people have different backgrounds, like other people. It is impossible to neatly separate the two groups and stereotype, based on disability or nondisability.

MYTH:
Nondisabled people think disabled people are happier being with "their own kind."

FACT:
Some nondisabled people do believe the above statement. For years disabled people were seen together because they attended separate schools, and had separate accessible facilities. They naturally socialized with people they met in these settings. But disabled people now are becoming integrated into regular schools, transportation, and social situations. As a result, nondisabled people are and will be seeing and meeting disabled people as individuals, not just as members of a group.

FIVE SCENES

Beth is a nondisabled person who has been working in her small town to attain equal rights for disabled citizens. She and a number of local disabled people have formed a committee and have brought about needed change in the community. Beth is invited to speak at a large community meeting in Metropolis to explain how her small group was organized. In the middle of her speech she is interrupted with the comment, "What right do you have to speak for disabled people? You don't understand what it's like to be disabled! We don't want ablebodied people meddling in our affairs."

This scene shows that some disabled people object to including nondisabled persons in their consumer groups. A nondisabled person will never be able to know *exactly* what it is like to be disabled. It is also true that a blind person will never know what it is like to be deaf. Even two people with the same disability will have different experiences. But people can be sensitive and understanding of issues without having a direct experience. Certainly, disabled groups should outline their own needs and desired programs. But nondisabled people can support those decisions with whatever talents they individually have to offer. Reverse discrimination is not the answer. Every concerned citizen is needed to remove barriers facing disabled citizens.

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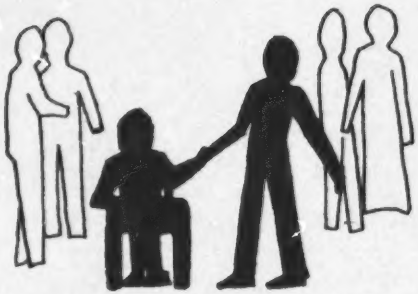
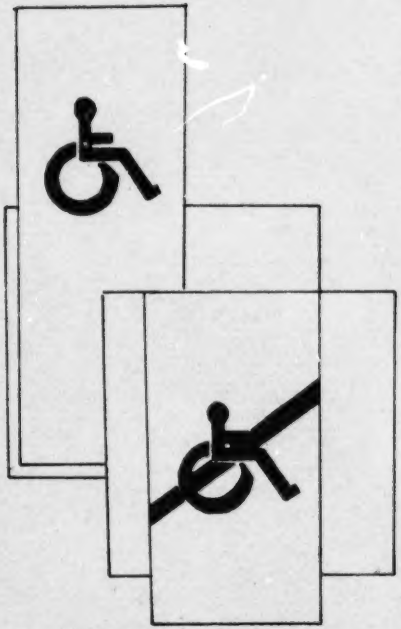


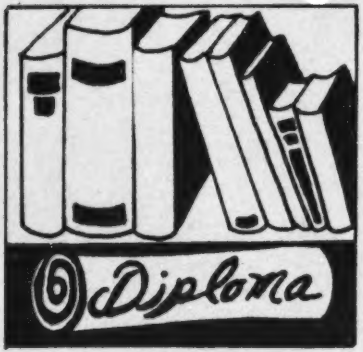
Fran, an amputee, is at a party at a friend's house and an attractive young man strikes up a conversation with her. They find they have several mutual interests. As the evening draws to a close, the man asks Fran if she would go to dinner and dancing with him the following weekend. Fran abruptly declines. She later asks the hostess, "What's with that guy I was talking to? He asked me to go out on a date with him. Does he like to 'help poor cripples' or does he just get a kick out of disability?"

Because of Fran's poor image of herself she assumes there is something wrong with a nondisabled man who asks her for a date. She jumps to the conclusion that he either feels sorry for her because of her disability or that he has a fetish for disabled women. She should not have jumped to such a conclusion without proof. For every person there is a risk that a new date may have unacceptable motives. But it is a chance that has to be taken or one will never socialize. Fran's negative attitude was unfair and prevented her from having a potentially pleasant evening with a new acquaintance.

Don is a freshman at State University and is paraplegic. He is invited to attend a fraternity party where new members are selected. Don has too much to drink and makes a fool of himself. The next week Don receives a note thanking him for attending the party, but informing him that he was not selected to join the fraternity. Don is furious. He believes he was not selected because he is disabled.

Don's immediate response was that there had been discrimination because of his disability. He did not stop to question his actions at the party. Don did not compare his behavior (drunkenness, making a fool of himself) with the behavior of those men who were accepted or rejected for membership. Don's response is not unusual, since discrimination does occur frequently. But he has to examine a situation carefully to determine if there are any indications of discrimination before he makes the accusation. He was probably denied membership because of his inappropriate behavior, not because of his disability.



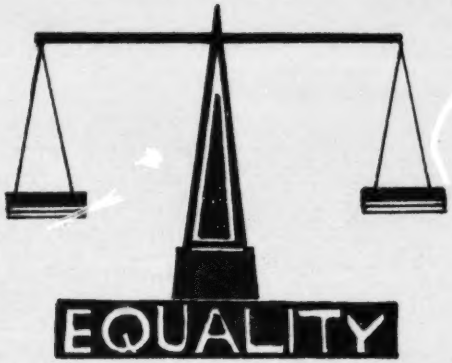


Tom is a disabled elementary school teacher who is busy preparing for Parents' Day. He is very nervous about the fact that his students' parents don't know he is disabled, and he expects shocked reactions from them. When the first set of parents arrive, they immediately express their concern about their son's reading problem, and ask Tom's advice about how they can help out at home. Tom is amazed that they didn't make an issue of his disability.

In this scene Tom expected to be viewed as a disabled person first, then as a teacher. Because of so many situations where people have seen his disability and not him as a person, he assumed all nondisabled people would react the same. He was surprised when his expectations were not realized. Nondisabled people have often had intimate contact with disabled people—in their families, schools, businesses. As a result of changing laws, architecture and attitudes, disabled people are becoming more visible and more nondisabled people are getting to know them. Everyone does not equate disability with incompetence or lack of intelligence, as Tom expected.

Jake is a nondisabled attorney in a public interest firm who takes a sincere interest in his clients. One day he overhears two disabled clients talking in the hall. They are discussing why any able-bodied person would take a professional interest in disabled people. Jake hears, "Well, you know those 'do-gooders,' they like to help out as long as they can make a buck while they're at it. And Jake probably couldn't make good in any other field of law. Why else would be here?" Jake is hurt and frustrated by their comments.

No one can know exactly why other people enter their professional fields. To assume any motive is to stereotype. Most people choosing this area of work are committed to the rights of all people. They see a need for advocates, believe in the rights of disabled people, and, hopefully, enjoy working with their clients. The area is a new frontier and is considered quite challenging.



WHEN YOU MEET A NONDISABLED PERSON....

1. It may be to your advantage to take the first step. Many nondisabled people feel unsure about how much importance should be attached to disability. They don't know whether to ignore it or mention it. If you bring the subject up first, you may all feel more at ease.

2. Answer questions about your disability if you feel comfortable about doing so. A lot of discomfort is caused by lack of knowledge about disability. Try to handle curiosity in a non-hostile manner. Hostility only stops communication and may reinforce negative attitudes about disabled people. Be open and honest.

3. If you need assistance, ask for it. If your request for help is accepted, tell the nondisabled person specifically what you need and explain how to do it. Be sure to thank the person for their help.

4. Don't automatically assume that a nondisabled person is insensitive about your disability. A nondisabled person who asks a wheelchair user to go dancing is not necessarily being ignorant. You may be setting limitations on yourself by not trying new things.

5. Be assertive about your needs and your rights. Able-bodied people are not mind-readers. Many disabled persons are unaware of the implications of disability and will be cooperative if you explain your rights to equal access and how they can be attained.

6. Be patient with nondisabled people's limitations. Often they are very nervous that they'll say or do the "wrong thing" around disabled people. In their concern, they will sometimes react inappropriately. All people make mistakes. Try to deal with embarassing situations with humor and grace.

7. Keep communications open during embarrassing or difficult situations. Try to work through problems, not ignore them.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. Participate in community activities, task forces, planning committees and professional associations. The more involved you become, the more aware nondisabled people will be of the needs of disabled citizens.

2. When you see a televison show portraying disabled people "like everyone else," write a complimentary comment to the producer and to the station carrying it.

3. When you read or view a presentation portraying disabled people in a negative or condescending way (sick, hostile, maladjusted, nonproductive), write a letter stating your opinion to the involved newspaper, magazine, or television station.

4. Remember that, like it or not, you will often be an example for your whole minority group. If you are comfortable with your disability, it will show and will help others to be more comfortable with disabled people in the future.

5. Learn your legal rights. Try to make people more aware of the legal rights of disabled people. Explain policies and legislation to nondisabled people.

6. Be active. Go to restaurants, social events, recreational centers, conventions, even if it takes a little effort. Once nondisabled people realize that disabled citizens can be part of the crowd, a lot of barriers will be removed.

7. Write to government officials, policy-makers and administrators about your views on issues that involve you. It is one of your responsibilities to educate the nondisabled public about your concerns. Make your presence known, and remind them that you vote and pay taxes, as do all citizens.

8. Politely refuse help if you don't need it.

9. Listen and be sensitive to the opinions of nondisabled people. Keep in touch with their ideas and let them know you want to hear what they have to say.

10. Keep cool.

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